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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN EGYPT: SEPTEMBER
10-11 VISIT OF DRL DAS BARKS-RUGGLES AND NEA DAS CARPENTER

REF: A. CAIRO 5796
[1](#)B. CAIRO 5168

Classified By: Classified by DCM Stuart Jones
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) In meetings with GOE and NGO contacts on September 10-11, DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles and NEA DAS J. Scott Carpenter reaffirmed USG support for democracy in Egypt and underscored the importance of GOE respect for human rights. MFA officials asserted that the GOE is committed to real political reform--albeit at a pace set by President Mubarak. The Deputy Interior Minister acknowledged USG concerns about human rights in Egypt. Key reformers in the NDP promised the September 19-21 party conference will accelerate President Mubarak's political reform program. A wide range of civil society contacts expressed fear that USG support for political reform in Egypt has diminished. Barks-Ruggles and Carpenter stressed that USG remains committed to democratization and human rights reform in Egypt. End summary.

MFA Says that Egypt is On-Track

[1](#)2. (C) MFA Deputy Assistant Minister for American Affairs Mohammad Abou El Dahab told Barks-Ruggles and Carpenter that political reform in Egypt is a genuine and significant process, but warned that "If we are going to be measured by deadlines, we might disappoint you." Aboul Dahab insisted the GOE is focused on "our own brand of democracy, at our own pace." Aboul Dahab reiterated that the GOE finds the USG effort to negotiate benchmarks for political reform "unacceptable," and said the ongoing bilateral Strategic Dialogue is the best venue for discussion and negotiation about Egyptian progress towards political reform. He did, however, acknowledge that the GOE owes the USG a formal answer on the proposed agreement on ESF. (Note: Aboul Dahab was accompanied by MFA Director for International NGO Issues, Mahmoud Nayel. Nayel's detailed comments on the pending registrations of IRI, NDI, and IFES are reported ref A. End note).

[1](#)3. (C) On human rights issues, Aboul Dahab, bristled when concern for Ayman Nour's condition was raised, stating curtly "that file is closed." He made it clear that political levels only were dealing with the case. In response to presentation of U.S. positions on the upcoming second session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and concerns about Egypt's role in lopsided resolutions to date, Aboul Dahab took on board the point, and promised to "look into" the role Egypt's mission in Geneva was playing. (Note: We do not believe this will lead to a change in the GOE's stance, but

does give us the opportunity to raise these issues again at higher levels as needed. End Note.)

SSIS Listens, but Gives Little Ground

¶4. (C) State Security Investigations Service (SSIS) Director and Deputy Interior Minister General Hassan Abdul Rahman thanked the DASes and Charge for "excellent cooperation" with the USG on security matters. DAS Barks-Ruggles noted USG appreciation for GOE cooperation on counter-terrorism issues, but noted the USG is also focused on promoting democracy, political reform, and human rights. Abdul Rahman said the GOE takes a hard, uncompromising line against any extremists who plan or attempt violence. He argued that the GOE had led the way in re-education of detained Islamic Group and Islamic Jihad extremists in the 1990s. Abdul Rahman asserted that GOE efforts had led IG and EIJ to repudiate past violence, and said SSIS supports websites linked to reformed IG and EIJ which assist in the ongoing struggle against extremism.

¶5. (C) Barks-Ruggles pressed Abdul Rahman on the SSIS response to multiple complaints from a wide range of Egyptian human rights organizations, including the NCHR. If the complaints come from "legitimate entities," said Abdul Rahman, SSIS seeks "to address concerns and modify its performance." Abdul Rahman asserted, however, that many complaints against SSIS come from "illegal entities" linked to leftist circles opposing USG-GOE links. Abdul Rahman said that many of these activists receive EU funding, but gave no specific examples. Warming to this theme, Abdul Rahman said "leftist NGOs" play a leading role in stirring up the Egyptian street against the GOE.

¶6. (C) Turning to the issue of IRI and NDI, Carpenter told Abdul Rahman the USG believes that it is important to "expand the political space" to allow the rise of political forces other than the NDP and the MB. Abdul Rahman said the GOE's greater concern is with unofficial, non-governmental support from U.S. sources for "illegal organizations" in Egypt. He asserted that the MB is "the source of all extremist groups in Egypt," and said their professed commitment to democracy, if taken at face value, would lead to "only one day of democracy." The MB, he said, is not an organization with internal democratic practices; it has no belief in a multi-party system, and it is opposed to equal rights for non-Muslims.

¶7. (C) Abdul Rahman opined that the MB electoral success was not a reflection of real MB influence in Egypt. The Egyptian people, he said, are "culturally and politically immature," and were led astray by MB independent candidates campaigning on the theme that Islam is under attack around the world. Abdul Rahman said U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Israeli operations against the Palestinians, had angered "the poor and the young" in Egypt, and made them susceptible to the MB slogan "Islam is the solution." The MB success in the 2005 parliamentary elections, said Abdul Rahman, "was not a real success nor was it a reflection of their real influence." Abdul Rahman asserted the GOE does not use the Emergency Laws against the MB. The ordinary penal and criminal code is sufficient, he said. The GOE only resorts to the EL in the case of violent extremists.

National Council for Human Rights

¶8. (C) In a meeting with NCHR Secretary General Ambassador Mokhles Qutb and other members of the NCHR executive committee, Barks-Ruggles and Carpenter praised NCHR's efforts, including its two annual reports on human rights in Egypt, and pressed the NCHR to step up its engagement with the GOE on specific complaints against the GOE submitted to the NCHR. Qutb and his colleagues said the Council had

repeatedly pushed the GOE to improve its human rights efforts, for example by recommending the lifting of the Emergency Law, the passage of unified law on places of worship, the passage of a new law on elections, and the removal of the religion category from the national ID cards. Qutb said the GOE's response rate to NCHR complaints had risen from 10 percent in 2004 to 48 percent in 2005, but that many of the replies continued to be either pro forma or inadequate. The NCHR is forwarding about 6,000 individual complaints per year to the GOE, and is considering the establishment of an ombudsman's office to streamline the complaint process.

NDP Reformers Looking Forward to NDP Conference

¶9. (C) Two leading members of the NDP reform wing linked to presidential son Gamal Mubarak said the September 19-21 NDP conference would help clarify the party's reform program for the coming year, though they warned the focus would be on general subjects (vice specific constitutional amendments). Cairo University political scientist Mohammad Kamal said the NDP-led government is working under considerable time pressure to stick to the reform agenda laid out by Mubarak in summer 2005. The challenge will be to develop the general reform concepts into specific legislation by the time parliament reconvenes in November, and then for the parliament to pass the new laws by the close of the session in May 2006, at which point any constitutional amendments must be ratified by a popular referendum.

¶10. (C) Hossam Badrawy, an NDP parliamentarian from 2000-2005 who now plays a key role on the NDP Policies Committee along with Kamal, noted the NDP's challenge is to make meaningful reform in education, health, economics, and politics, so as to diminish the "credibility gap" that threatens the relationship of the NDP with the Egyptian populace. "There is a huge mistrust of the NDP by the public," said Badrawy, "and I don't blame them." Kamal noted the party is hard-pressed to compete with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Badrawy said the secular opposition was bereft of ideas that could win the support of the people. Echoing points also made by Kamal, Badrawy characterized the 88 MB-affiliated independent members of parliament as "first class politicians" whose disciplined presence in the People's

Assembly has forced the NDP bloc to improve its parliamentary operations.

Hisham Kassem: Independent Press is Top Priority

¶11. (C) Kassem told Barks-Ruggles and Carpenter that his disillusionment at the GOE's treatment of Ayman Nour's Ghad Party, of which Kassem is a vice president for foreign relations, had led him to give up on political opposition activities. The Ghad Party, he said, is dead, and he will not allow himself to be nominated for re-appointment to its leadership. Kassem said "I've come to accept that I can only be part of a transition" to democracy, as opposed to actually participating in a democratic process. Kassem said his success with his newspaper, Al-Masry Al-Youm (AMAY), had convinced him the most meaningful contribution he can make to reform in Egypt, under present circumstances, is to strengthen and expand the newspaper. He noted that the paper, starting its third year of operations, is now profitable. Circulation has risen from 12,000 to 50,000, mostly in Cairo. Kassem is now focused on making AMAY a national independent paper of record, by beginning provincial printing and setting up nationwide distribution facilities.

¶12. (C) Kassem said the new press law was "basically negative," but noted the real battle is not press freedom issues, but massive subsidies the GOE provides to the State press. Kassem said he calculates the Egyptian market can

provide approximately LE 600 million (\$105m) in advertising revenue annually. Al-Ahram, the flagship of the state press, has an annual overhead of LE 1.7 billion (\$298m). According to Kassem, Ahram and the other state newspapers would need to cut 90 percent of their staff if they lost their subsidies.

Activists Question USG Commitment, Urge Pressure on GOE

¶13. (C) Among civil society activists who met with Barks-Ruggles and Carpenter were Hafez Abou Seada of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Ghahda Shahbender of Shayfeencom, Hossam Bahgat of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, and analyst Hani Shukrullah of the Ahram Center. The detailed observations of Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Hassan Sawaf of the Ibn Khaldun Center are representative of views held by many Egyptian civil society activists. Reprising the themes of his recent publications, Saad Eddin Ibrahim said the 2005 "boom year for democracy" in Egypt had given way to a host of setbacks in late 2005 and 2006. Beginning with the GOE's harsh reaction to the initial parliamentary electoral success of the MB independents, and continuing with the conviction of opposition leader Ayman Nour on politically-motivated forgery charges, the GOE has taken a number of decisions that led Ibrahim to question its commitment to democracy. In particular, Ibrahim pointed to the postponement of the local elections until 2008, and the extension of the state of emergency also until 2008, as evidence of the GOE's diminished commitment to pursuing political reform. Ibrahim harshly criticized what he termed the USG's tacit approval of the GOE's reform "charade."

¶14. (C) Carpenter, flagging President Bush's September 9 Wall Street Journal interview, noted there has been no strategic shift in USG democracy promotion, but rather a tactical adjustment in light of recent regional developments. IKC board member Hassan Sawaf said USG pressure had led to concrete results in 2005, and asked "Why are you backing off now?" Ibrahim said that USG pressure on the GOE is currently "too subtle to be felt." Sawaf warned that without public USG support, democratic activists in Egypt and the wider region are at risk of becoming like Iraq's Kurds (i.e., encouraged by USG policy to challenge the status quo, and then oppressed when USG policies shifted). Sawaf said the USG is making a mistake by thinking that it can support authentic reform in Egypt by working with the GOE: "They will always try to fool you," he insisted. Sawaf argued the best way to press the GOE on political reform was to use the leverage of U.S. Foreign Military Financing--noting that only this would get the GOE's attention. He dismissed recent GOE warnings about using conditionality as "bluffing. You must call their bluff," he recommended. Sawaf dismissed the argument that USG pressure for reform was "foreign interference" in Egyptian affairs. "You are already interfering in our internal affairs by subsidizing and supporting a corrupt and brutal regime. You are mistaken if you think you are already doing enough to pressure the GOE."

¶15. (C) Sawaf downplayed fears of a Muslim Brotherhood takeover of Egypt via the ballot box as both "not feasible, and manageable even if it were to happen." He said the MB's 2005 parliamentary success was the result of its wide-scale mobilization in the face of a fractured NDP and a decimated opposition. According to Sawaf, the MB made significant gains in 2005 precisely because it competed effectively when the NDP and the opposition were either divided or weak. Moreover, said Sawaf, even if the MB were to achieve greater electoral success in the future, it could not realistically hope to undo the pluralistic basis of Egyptian society. Sawaf and Ibrahim said the USG needs to continue to press the GOE for a timetable and require benchmarks for political reform. Finally, they recommended the USG step up assistance to civil society to send a clear signal about USG commitment to reform.

¶16. (C) Gameela Ismail, wife of imprisoned Al Ghad Party

leader Ayman Nour, told the DASes that Nour will try to reschedule his postponed heart surgery (ref B) for late October (after Ramadan)--ensuring this time that he is able to have the pre-surgical examinations he needs to ensure complications due to his diabetes and other health issues are addressed. She is not optimistic about Nour being released under either a presidential amnesty order, or a health-based pardon.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Throughout conversations with government, civil society and others a common thread emerged pointing to the skepticism of Egyptians about the USG,s (and the Secretary,s and President,s) commitment to reform. While

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the visit did much to dispel the idea that the U.S. was trading cooperation on security for any real movement on reform, we will need to continue to emphasize that message in the coming weeks and months. This will include following up quickly on any promises made or set aside at the NDP convention, and holding both reformers and non-reformers accountable in bilateral and multilateral discussions about Egyptian and regional political reform. End Comment.

¶18. (U) DAS Carpenter and Barks-Ruggles have cleared on this message.
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